

VARIOUS THOUGHTS ON OBJECTIVITY

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My project flows from a question I used to ask my friends and family: “Imagine a powerful wizard sneaks into your house while you relax in bed. Your head, resting on a pillow, is completely still. The wizard sees you sleeping and transforms your pillow to solid stone! Assuming the pillow is the exact same shape and temperature, would you know anything had happened?”

For this project, I became the wizard and transformed one of my pillows into an exact cement replica. The piece, however, has gone far past the exploration of a simple hypothetical scenario. I chose to physically manifest such a pillow after spending many hours thinking about objectivity. Ultimately, this pillow represents the futility of gaining comfort from our subjective experiences.

Reality always prevails. It is better to find true happiness and comfort within the bounds of reality. If one is to attain comfort in the cement pillow, one must stay completely still.

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Narrative:

For me, Oxbow started with one good question in the first week: what are your values? We were supposed to write up to ten, but I figured I would challenge myself to narrow down my list as much as possible. My list went from seven, to five, to three, and finally, all the way down to one. A trait that, if exercised would contain every value I find important. Objectivity. The Roman politician Marcus Tullius Cicero famously stated “Gratitude is not only the greatest of all virtues, but the parent of all the others”. I agreed with this statement for years until I realized that gratitude falls under objectivity, making objectivity the grandparent of all other virtues, and therefore the greatest. This realization largely stemmed from how my gratitude changed after I was able to better see my place in the world and how lucky I truly am. I became more and more grateful the more objectively I saw myself, and whenever something bad happened to me, it couldn't hurt me as much. One of the hardest things for me to do was convince myself that it's ok to feel relaxed. It is challenging to accept the fact that a healthy and happy life is not dependant upon most of the things we are told we need to feel ok. I believe that all you need to be happy is good food, good shelter, and a good community. Everything else is essentially superfluous. I came to this personal revelation only recently, and it was a big pill to swallow, because it meant that if I was to put it into practice, I should not buy anything more except food. Most new things can bring joy for a few hours, maybe a few days at most, but after that they just become another part of your life. People who have good things may be familiar with the feeling of joy when it's new, but I would argue that they are not happier than people who have good food, good shelter, and a good community. There are yet more comforts to be extracted from objective thought. I was terrified of my future for the majority of my life. I would look at myself in the context of those around me, and felt like there was no chance of me succeeding; until I realized that for me, success only means leading a happy life. I realized there were far more opportunities that I had never seen, and, furthermore I gain much comfort in idea that if everything else fails, I can always become a permaculture farmer. This would not be my first choice, but I believe it is always going to be an open gate to a relatively happy life, which eliminates almost all of the fear I had about my future.

Thesis:

We must seek objectivity in order to better our understanding of everything. Putting fact over opinion every time is not an easy task, but it is vital to growing as a person. The pursuit of objectivity will lead to self-improvement in the purest sense of the word. When making a decision, if every angle, perspective, and opinion is compiled and considered (an impossible task most of the time), a “better” decision can be made. Theoretically, as one comes closer to gaining an objective insight into a situation, it becomes harder and harder to process all of the information that must be taken into account. Often, the problem at hand will evade a clear solution as more thought is put into it, which I believe is reflective of the nature of the universe. Seeing objectively would not bring us closer to making decisions based on answers provided somewhere within the eternal, inherent laws of the universe. There are laws that govern how matter and energy flow, and everything else is simply a product of that. There is never going to be a set of laws that determine how we should live in the same way that the laws of physics determine how things act. Instead of using the pursuit of objectivity to seek an “objective” set of morals, subjective human experiences should be accounted for as yet another factor in the

decision making process. Actively trying to see the world objectively will make decisions harder, but better, or something that could be easily argued as better.

Subjectivity:

I believe that the human experience is an inherently subjective one. It is impossible to shed our subjective lens and see the world perfectly objectively. This entire paper rests on the statement that objectivity is worth pursuing, yet this statement should really be “the ability to be objective is worth pursuing”. The value of the subjective experience cannot be understated. Some of the greatest happiness a human can feel comes from our raw, subjective experiences. It will never be possible to leave behind such a huge defining part of one’s humanity, but the ability to know that your perception is flawed and does distort is the first huge step. Furthermore, to be able to focus your perception and step outside yourself at will is incredibly valuable for increasing one’s overall happiness. Through the ability to adjust perception at will, we can relish the joyous feelings and moments in our lives, embracing the subjective, while also reserving the ability to take a step back from ourselves and see a bad situation more clearly. In my experience, the general stress of life tends to build up and go unchecked for vast stretches of time. This stress translates to a general sadness and angst that can permeate every facet of my life. The beautiful thing, the useful part, is not our ability to forsake our subjectivity, but to take it into account and momentarily put it aside for situations where it would only bring us useless suffering. Not only does directly inspecting every issue and stressor and logically figuring out a plan to deal with it eliminate the feeling of general sadness and stress, but it also grows your ability to deal with your own mind better in the future. I considered titling this paper “The Greatest Virtue vs the Greatest Value”, but I realized that such a title, by putting the two against each other, would be misleading. It is not an either/or scenario, but rather an acquired skill, the skill to control your brain with your mind.

Attaining objectivity:

I will argue that in order to know true objectivity, one must first know everything. Everything is intrinsically connected, so, to be able to see every side of one thing, one must first be able to see every side of everything.

I see objective sight as having two sides. One requires the observer to be able to discard all knowledge of how the thing should be, act, or look, and observe it free of any preconceived notions of what it should be. Artists are often encouraged to reject their ideas of what the observed object is being depicted in the work should look like, and instead reproduce how the thing looks in its pure, un-romanticized form. Without the alterations inevitably produced by our subjective “understanding” of the thing, it will end up looking much closer to its real life counterpart. (Making art in this manner proves that we can, to some extent, shed our “subjective lens” and see more objectively through simple exercise of willpower). The same concept also applies to non-physical things. By taking in a situation as it is, one can live more freely in their life. Often it seems as though there are thousands of little inconsequential rules that govern many people’s lives. Most of the time, these rules are followed with little consideration for why they are being followed or what is gained from them. I often find myself breaking them with no negative consequences for me or anyone else. By seeing the strings that pull us around, we can more clearly see how weak most of them are and forge our own path in the world. The other side

of objective thought requires the ability to go in the complete opposite direction. To use the example of physical objects, it would be to observe something as a concept rather than the object itself. The ancient Greek philosopher Plato famously came up with the theory of forms, which states that behind every physical object, there is an unchanging idea, or form. A book, for example, is a physical object that can be destroyed or altered or viewed in terms of its color and texture, but the form of a book is unchanging and pure. He believed that physical objects were merely imitations of these higher forms. If one has knowledge of these higher forms, they possess, in his mind, objective knowledge. Higher knowledge. To again extrapolate this idea to nonphysical things, one could look at a situation and see it in terms of the elements that compose it. The conscious categorization of the nature of a decision or situation should lead to a more thoughtful decision, but lacks the direct and decisive advantages of the first method. I believe that the best understanding of the world comes from applying both to one's perception.

Ethical objectivism:

How should objective thought play into our moral systems? I truly believe that there is no such thing as inherent good and bad or any code of ethics beyond what we create for ourselves. We can test and prove the laws and forces of the universe that dictate how things will move and act, but no such tests can be conducted to decide the correct moral code. Some objectivists claim that the main goal of objectivism is to come closer to some set of objective values, but I believe that saying there is such a thing goes against the fundamental process of objective thought. Observation is key to understanding the world more clearly, so it can be, through simple observation, known that almost everybody has a different moral code. If there is "good" and "bad" beyond what we make up, it is as of yet unknown to us. Even renowned theologians such as Don Cupitt have observed that, despite what many religious doctrines may say, people as a whole do not follow the moral laws given to humans by a higher force. In his book "Crisis of Moral Authority", Don Cupitt stated, "A God out there and values out there, if they existed, would be utterly useless and unintelligible to us. There is nothing to be gained by nostalgia for the old objectivism, which was in any case used only to justify arrogance, tyranny, and cruelty" (1970). When he says "old objectivism", Cupitt is referring to objectivist thinkers like Ayn Rand, who believed in an extremely individualistic approach to objectivity. He strongly states that such moral codes should, if they exist, act on our behavior in the same fashion as gravity acts on matter: with at least some degree of influence. If moral laws are on the same level as the other laws, they should be as consistent, but clearly aren't. Objectivity is often associated with neutrality, especially within the context of reporting and journalism. The idea is that a good "objective" journalist should report only facts (which they should), but they also are inclined present both sides of any argument as equal. The problem is that both sides of an argument are not always equal. Being objective often means having an opinion. One of my favorite authors, Howard Zinn, gave his thoughts on objectivity in his book "Declarations of Independence Cross-Examining American Ideology".

"Why should we cherish "objectivity", as if ideas were innocent, as if they don't serve one interest or another? Surely, we want to be objective if that means telling the truth as we see it, not concealing information that may be embarrassing to our point of view. But we don't want to be objective if it means pretending that ideas don't play a part in the social struggles of our time, that we don't take sides in those struggles.

Indeed, it is impossible to be neutral. In a world already moving in certain directions, where wealth and power are already distributed in certain ways, neutrality means accepting the way things are now. It is a world of clashing interests – war against peace, nationalism against internationalism, equality against greed, and democracy against elitism – and it seems to me both impossible and undesirable to be neutral in those conflicts.”

Zinn astutely points out how it is “impossible” and “undesirable” and ultimately futile to be neutral in our world. However, objectivity and neutrality are not one and the same. I would argue that if one is to be truly objective, they will not be neutral on almost any topic. A sort of ultra-extrapolated form of hedonism began to form in place of my previous moral code when I thought of some moral situations objectively. There is an element of ethical relativism that goes along with it, but ultimately the ethics always tends towards what will bring the least despair to the most people. Breaking down layers of perception where most have not is the ultimate quality of the objective thinker.

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<http://www.iep.utm.edu/objectiv/>

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